

VZCZCXRO8564

PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #0631/01 1291315

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 081315Z MAY 08

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1754

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2218

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2523

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000631

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA; ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND  
PDAS WARLICK

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PINR SA IR USUN LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI PESSIMISTIC ON IMMINENT COMPROMISE;  
SHIA CLERIC WARNS AGAINST "UNDERMINING THE RESISTANCE"

REF: A. BEIRUT 627

¶B. BEIRUT 618

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On May 8, the Charge urged Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, in a morning phone call before senior Shia cleric Sheikh Qabalan was to convene the Higher Islamic Shia Council, to use his influence with Qabalan to present a moderate stance in his scheduled press conference. Berri cited senior Sunni cleric Mufti Qabbani's "inflammatory" statements the previous night to justify why Qabalan could not be moderate. Berri called the Cabinet's decision to remove the Shia head of Beirut airport security, Brig. Gen. Choucair, "unacceptable," saying he was an honest man who should be given a fair investigation. The Charge encouraged Berri to use his good offices as the Parliament Speaker to calm Qabalan and other Shia figures. A pessimistic Berri doubted a compromise could be reached unless the Cabinet revised its decision on Choucair. The Higher Islamic Shia council met at length on May 8, delaying Sheikh Qabalan's televised press conference by two hours. When Qabalan spoke, he warned that "decisions that affect vital weapons of the Resistance, such as the (Hizballah) communications system, are undermining the Resistance." End summary.

ASKING BERRI TO TAKE  
RESPONSIBILITY

¶2. (C) On the second day of opposition-run demonstrations which closed the Beirut International Airport and the airport road, the Charge spoke with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri shortly before senior Shia cleric Sheikh Qabalan was to convene the Higher Islamic Shia Council. Noting the previous evening's sporadic gunfire in downtown Beirut and continuing skirmishes in parts of the Hizballah-held Bekaa Valley, she urged Berri to use his influence with Qabalan to present a moderate stance in his press conference after the meeting.

¶3. (C) Berri expressed concern that after the previous night's "inflammatory" statements (Ref A) by senior Sunni cleric Mufti Qabbani, Qabalan would be forced to respond with harshness. Berri blasted Qabbani for being "crazy" and accused him of being "on Saad Hariri's payroll." He noted that a number of senior Shia clerics had met late into the

previous night to discuss Qabbani's words and had expressed great upset at the content and tone of the Sunni's statements.

HEAD OF AIRPORT SECURITY  
"DESERVES AN INVESTIGATION," SAYS BERRI

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¶4. (C) Berri mentioned that he, Sheikh Qabalan, and Hizballah SecGen Hassan Nasrallah had individually spoken to Lebanese Armed Forces Commander (LAF) Michel Sleiman earlier in the week. Berri said he was convinced that Sleiman personally opposed the transfer of the head of airport security Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair (Ref B). Berri described Choucair as an "honest man who may have made some mistakes." He added that Sheikh Qabalan was from the same village as Choucair and was therefore certain to support the general.

¶5. (C) Berri then reported that he and Qabalan had both spoken separately to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora prior to the ten-hour May 5 Cabinet meeting (Ref B). Insisting that Siniora had assured him the Cabinet would recommend that Choucair's case be forwarded for investigation, Berri said it was "unacceptable" that the Cabinet had decided instead to transfer him back to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) without an investigation. It was wrong to "punish the general," said Berri. Charge noted that the transfer was actually back to Brig. Gen. Choucair's home LAF unit, hardly a "punishment."

¶6. (C) Charge impressed upon Berri the USG view that the opposition and his party, Amal Movement, needed to take

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responsibility for the street barricades and clashes. She appealed to him as Parliament Speaker to use his good offices to urge Qabalan and other key Shia figures to calm the situation. She referred to the State Department spokesman's May 7 comments, which expressed concern over the violent demonstrations' impact on the Lebanese people and economy.

PESSIMISTIC ABOUT A COMPROMISE

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¶7. (C) The Charge asked if there was room for a compromise to be found, to which Berri replied that he was pessimistic. Without a revision to the Cabinet's decision to remove the head of airport security, he did not believe the situation could be resolved. Speaking in French, Berri added that the media coverage on the upcoming POTUS-Siniora meeting (which appeared on Hizballah-run al-Manar television) would be a "piston" or boost, for Siniora.

SHIA CLERIC CRITICIZES EFFORTS  
TO "UNDERMINE THE RESISTANCE"

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¶8. (U) Although the public had been expecting Higher Islamic Shia Council Acting Chairman Sheikh Abdel Amir Qabalan to speak at 1100, his press conference was delayed for nearly two hours as the Council met in an emergency session. In the end, he and a spokesman issued statements and invited concerned Shia to express their views. First, Sheikh Ali Al Khatieb read a statement which noted that "what is happening now is the continuation of the Israeli-American war against Lebanon." Khatieb stated that "responsibility for this serious situation is with whoever took the wrong decision on behalf of foreign powers...withdrawal of these decisions will defuse the situation, while continuing with these decisions will taken Lebanon into the unknown." Khatieb alluded to "options" discussed during the meeting with senior Shia clerics, but did not specify what these options were. The Council's statement also condemned "any talk that harmed the role and standing of the Iranian government, which had stood by the Lebanese people." Khatieb read out that "calls to oust the Iranian Ambassador fall under the methodical

incitement by the Americans and the Israelis against the forces of Resistance in the region and in the world."

¶ 9. (U) Sheikh Qabalan then spoke, noting that "decisions that affect the vital weapon of the Resistance (Hizballah), the communications system, are undermining the Resistance. Those decisions are serving Israel's objectives...Islam calls for careful preservation of unity...Beirut is the capital of Lebanon and has always been protected by the Resistance." Qabalan hinted that "at least two Arab nations" were implicated in this "uprising." (Many took this to be a reference to Jordan and Saudi Arabia.) Qabalan called on all to act responsibly and to avoid falling into the trap of "internationalization" of Lebanon's problems.

¶ 10. (U) Qabalan asked whether "a government whose legitimacy is not recognized" has the right to place the Resistance in a position that could get them killed at the hands of the enemy. Media accounts also report that the Higher Council meeting had decided that the most recent decisions undertaken by the Cabinet (transfer of Brig. Gen. Choucair from his Beirut Airport security position and the government's having made public the existence of the Hizballah fiber optic communications network) were part of an "Israeli-American war, a war whose military aspect was won by Lebanon in 2006; a war they want to continue via a political war, through, regrettably, Lebanese hands, hands that are supported by known Arabic entities."

SISON